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*Review of:*

*THE MEANING OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT* by Amos Rapoport  
Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982

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The study of people relating and reacting to their environments is the central focus of the book, *The Meaning of the Built Environment*, by Amos Rapoport. To study the ways people react to their environments, Rapoport suggests many methods including observation, interviews and questionnaires, analyzing historical, cross-cultural examples and tracing patterns, regularities and consistencies in human social behavior. These methods can show: 1) how people see the environment, 2) how they feel about the environment, 3) the aspects that they like or dislike about the environment and, 4) attitudes about the environment which appear to be self-evident. Aside from these more traditional methods of studying people in relationship to the environment, Rapoport introduces an additional method useful in studying this complex topic, the use of nonverbal communication as a model categorizing environmental interactions by domains.

*The Meaning of the Built Environment* is a book that uses symbolic interactionist theory in attempting to explain how people understand the nature of the meanings in the environment. Rapoport feels that "people react to environments globally and affectively before they analyze and evaluate them in specific terms" (p. 14). If that is true, then what are those global, affective responses? Responses are based on the meaning that environments have for people. Some environments, through color, furnishings, implied social status and other factors, cause people to attribute more meaningful affective responses than do others. These affective responses can be global, that is, experienced by a variety of cultures, regardless of symbolic differences, in either positive or negative ways. Another concept Rapoport stresses is that objects or even the environment itself can take on a functional, affective meaning. Globally, religious dwellings seem to take on this association even before the individual analyzes and evaluates the environment for specific meanings. A final, important concept that Rapoport stresses is that people, upon experiencing an environment, seem to immediately seek understanding about its meaning:

The human mind basically works by trying to impose meaning on the world through the use of cognitive taxonomies, categories, and schemata, and that built forms, like other aspects of material cultures, are physical expressions of these schemata and domains (p. 15).

Rapoport feels that "the meaning of many environments is generated through personalization--through taking possession, completing it and changing it" (p. 21). Rapoport illustrates several of these concepts by suggesting that often designers and architects design buildings

and environments in perceptual terms, or from their own design perspective. This differs from the lay members of public that commonly react to the environment in associational terms which stress meaning through the social context. A lack of communication results when designers produce office or home environments that win scholarly acclaim but leave the lay public unhappy because the environment cannot be personalized in a meaningful way. Rapoport states :

"...Human behavior, including interaction and communication is influenced by roles, contexts, and situations that, in turn, are frequently communicated by cues in the settings making up the environment; the relationships among these are learned as part of inculturation or acculturation. The fact is that we all rely on such cues in order to act appropriately, though clearly some people are more sensitive than others..." (p. 68).

People can behave differently in certain social contexts "by decoding the available cues for their meaning--these cues may be in the physical environment" (p. 69). For instance, when one visits McDonalds, Wendy's, or Kentucky Fried Chicken, the environmental cues such as signage, color, and basic construction of the structure aid the consumer in the knowledge that certain behaviors will be needed, such as ordering, paying for the meal immediately and eating, or leaving with the food. If that same consumer was in a restaurant like Maxim's in Paris, France, obviously the eat-and-run behavior of McDonalds would be inappropriate. The environmental cues in situations such as these act as mnemonic devices guiding one's responses. Rapoport demonstrates that this mnemonic function of the environment is a global response pattern although "the appropriateness of the behavior and the definition of the situation are culturally variable" (p. 77).

To address which environmental and social cues specify the nature of the setting so that appropriate behaviors are obtained, Rapoport introduces a nonverbal communication model. The advantages of using this particular model are that it is a conceptually easy to understand system of explaining behaviors and that linguistic analysis of interactions is not the focus. With these two properties, Rapoport examines social interaction within the environment by introducing the analysis of elements in a given setting. Thorough analysis of cues that fall within the three domains insures that the individual can pick up appropriate behavior cues from the environment, which in turn, will influence his behaviors. The domains are:

1. Fixed-feature elements--such as standard architectural elements such as walls, ceilings, windows, floors--elements which change very slowly. In the larger environment, streets and buildings would fall into this domain.

2. Semifixed-feature elements--would include urban elements such as interior and exterior decorating and types of furniture. In the larger environment--street furniture, lighting, advertising signs, window displays and landscaping would be included.

3. Nonfixed-feature elements--related to human inhabitants, proxemics (physical space), kinesics (body positions and postures)

in relationship to each other, and any other nonverbal elements present.

Gathering data within the nonverbal communication approach, one finds that it has its own utility because it is generalizable to other cultures. This approach helps the researcher gather information about humans in relationship to the environment that can aid designers or others involved in shaping the environment, by increasing designers' awareness of appropriate designs that fit the occupants' associational perceptions.

Rapoport describes the process of the individual's interaction within the environmental space. Although other methods of analysis have been introduced such as behavioral observations, interviews, questionnaires, historical and cross-cultural analysis and tracing the patterns, regularities or irregularities of cultural behavior, this book introduces another method of analysis, the nonverbal communication approach. Rapoport suggests that environmental cues act as mnemonics guiding an individual's behavior in social settings. He feels that his model adds a new dimension of analysis to the other approaches because it is simple to understand and very general. The overall goal appears to be to assist those who interact in the environment, including designers and lay public, with an increased awareness of what cues mean and how they can affect the (perceived) appropriateness of behavior in the environment.

I felt that this book presented useful information but often in difficult to understand ways. First, Rapoport demonstrated the general nature of this theory by using many examples. However, some examples were not especially meaningful in relationship to this society. The behavior of tribespeople in third world countries is applicable to a certain extent. Some of the most meaningful examples the author uses to stress his concepts are those relating to environmental cues in this country, such as fast-food restaurants. With respect to symbolic interactionism, Rapoport seems to apply the most basic of concepts, not relating other important concepts such as the role of "me", "I", or "taking the role of the other" in this work. However, in spite of the criticisms, I found Rapoport's book to be filled with useful illustrations. The nonverbal communication model was illustrated which helped in immediate comprehension. I believe that this book is important to read because it introduces symbolic interactionism concepts in a slightly different context than is usual.